EVALUATION MANAGEMENT REPORT

LESSONS LEARNED 1983-1986

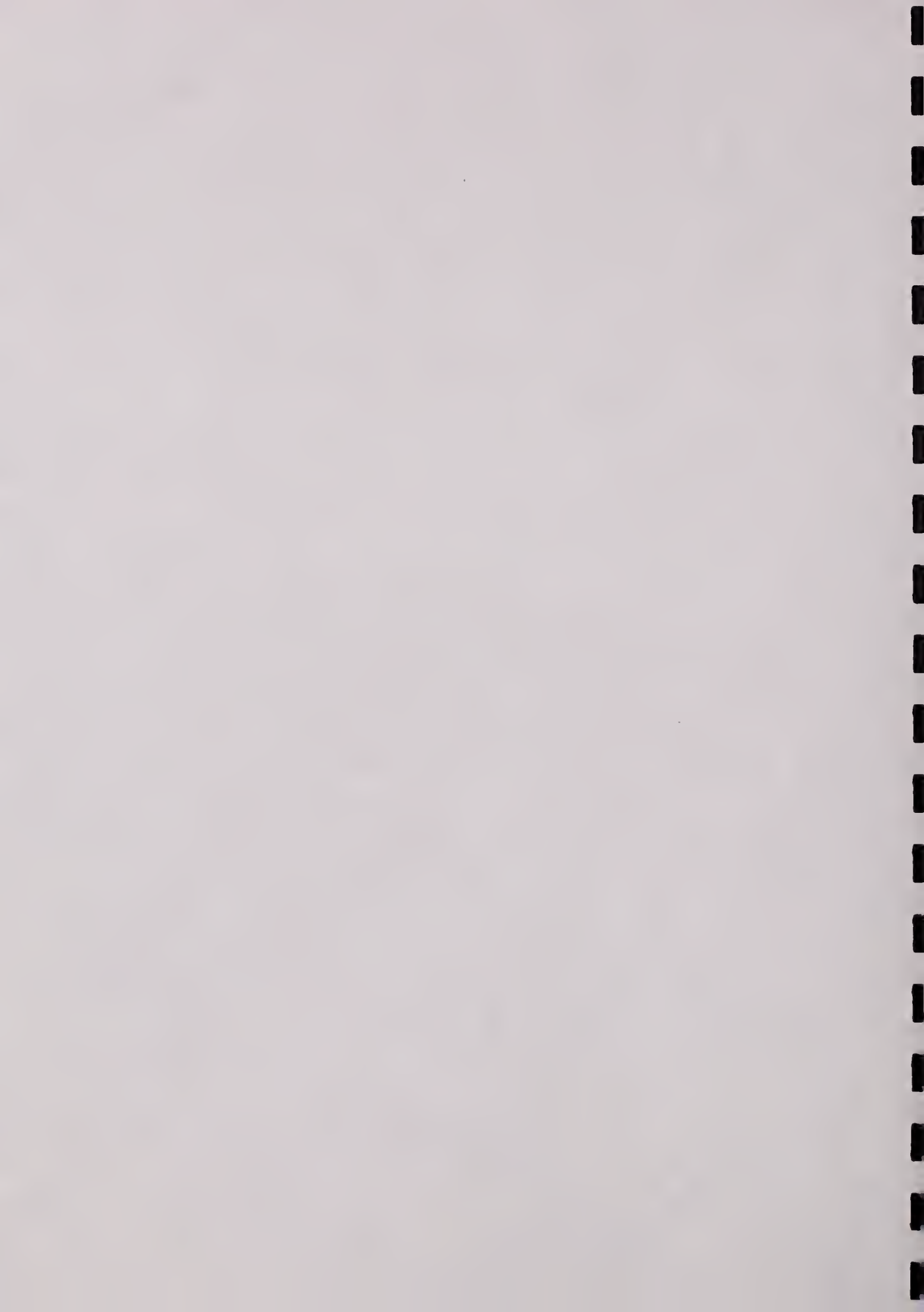## *EVALUATION TECHNOLOGIES INCORPORATED*
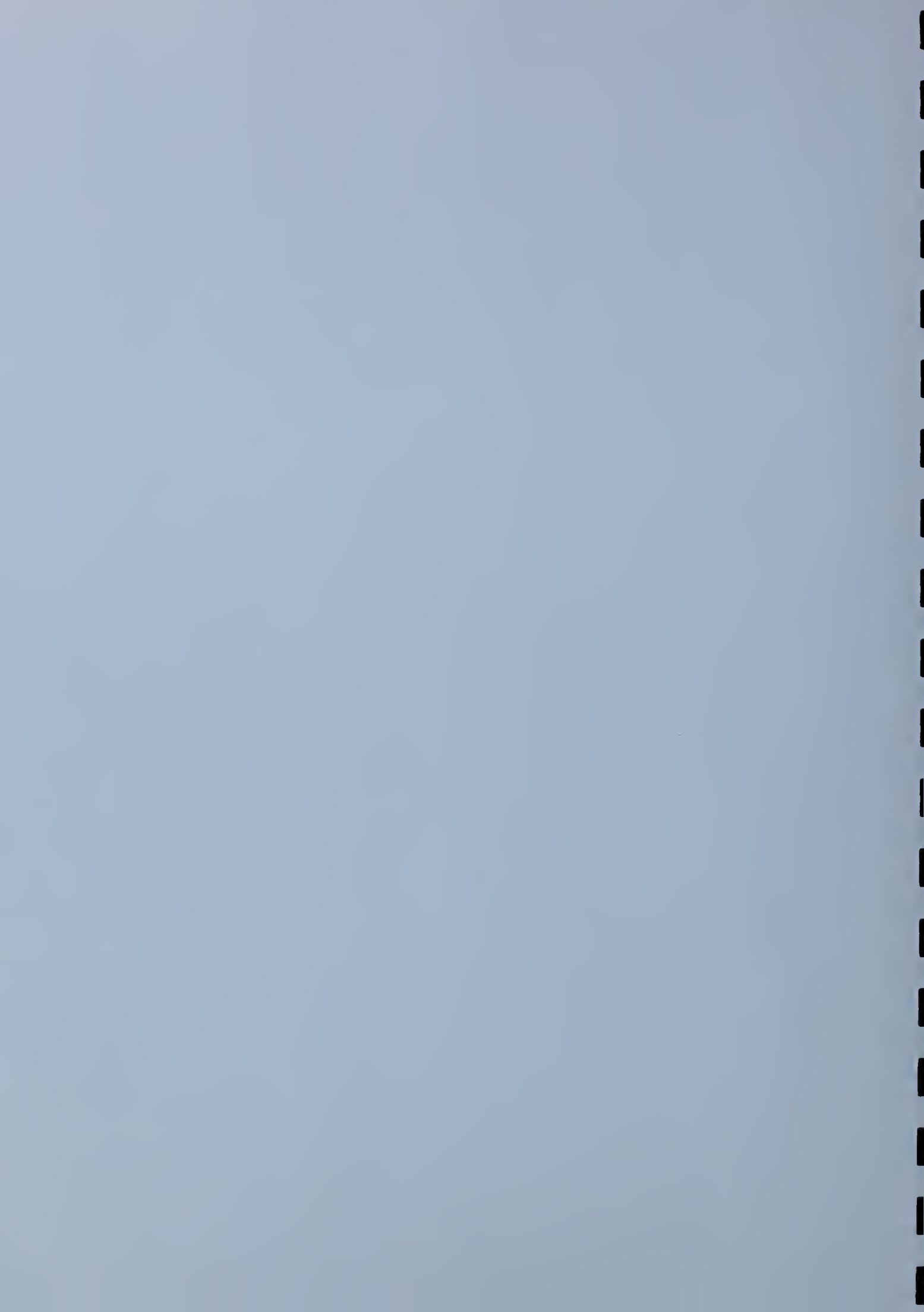
EVALUATION MANAGEMENT REPORT
LESSONS LEARNED 1983-1986

Prepared for
National Endowment for the Arts
Harold Horowitz, Director of Research

Prepared by
Evaluation Technologies Incorporated
Barbara J. Waite, Project Manager

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROJECT HISTORY

Evaluation as a management support function was institutionalized at the National Endowment for the Arts in October 1971 with the establishment of the Endowment's Evaluation Office. By 1979 three types of evaluation were in place. "In the past, evaluation has been used largely to pre-screen applicants so that panels can make grant recommendations based on the applicant's quality and potential ability to achieve the objectives specified in the guidelines. The second most frequent type of evaluation undertaken has been an assessment of the performance of the grantee after receipt of the grant award. This is known as 'grantee specific' evaluation. This gives the Endowment an idea of how effectively the grantee is using the grant. The third type of evaluation is done to measure program category effectiveness. In other words, it provides information about whether the funding category is actually meeting its objectives and contributing to the attainment of the Endowment's overall goals."[1] Also in 1979, it was anticipated that "As operational planning is undertaken, the programs will be identifying measurable and/or observable objectives. Once done, evaluation can be pegged to these. Assessment methods appropriate to arts support can be improved as a result."[2]

The Office of Evaluation operationalized the Endowment's position that "Evaluation, therefore, is important both as an implementation tool and as an aid to planning."[3] By 1980, however, the evaluation function had been subsumed, with decreased emphasis, under the overall responsibilities of the Research Division.

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[1]   General Plan, 1980-1984. National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Policy and Planning, April 1979, page 146.

[2]   Ibid, page 147

[3]   Ibid, page 147
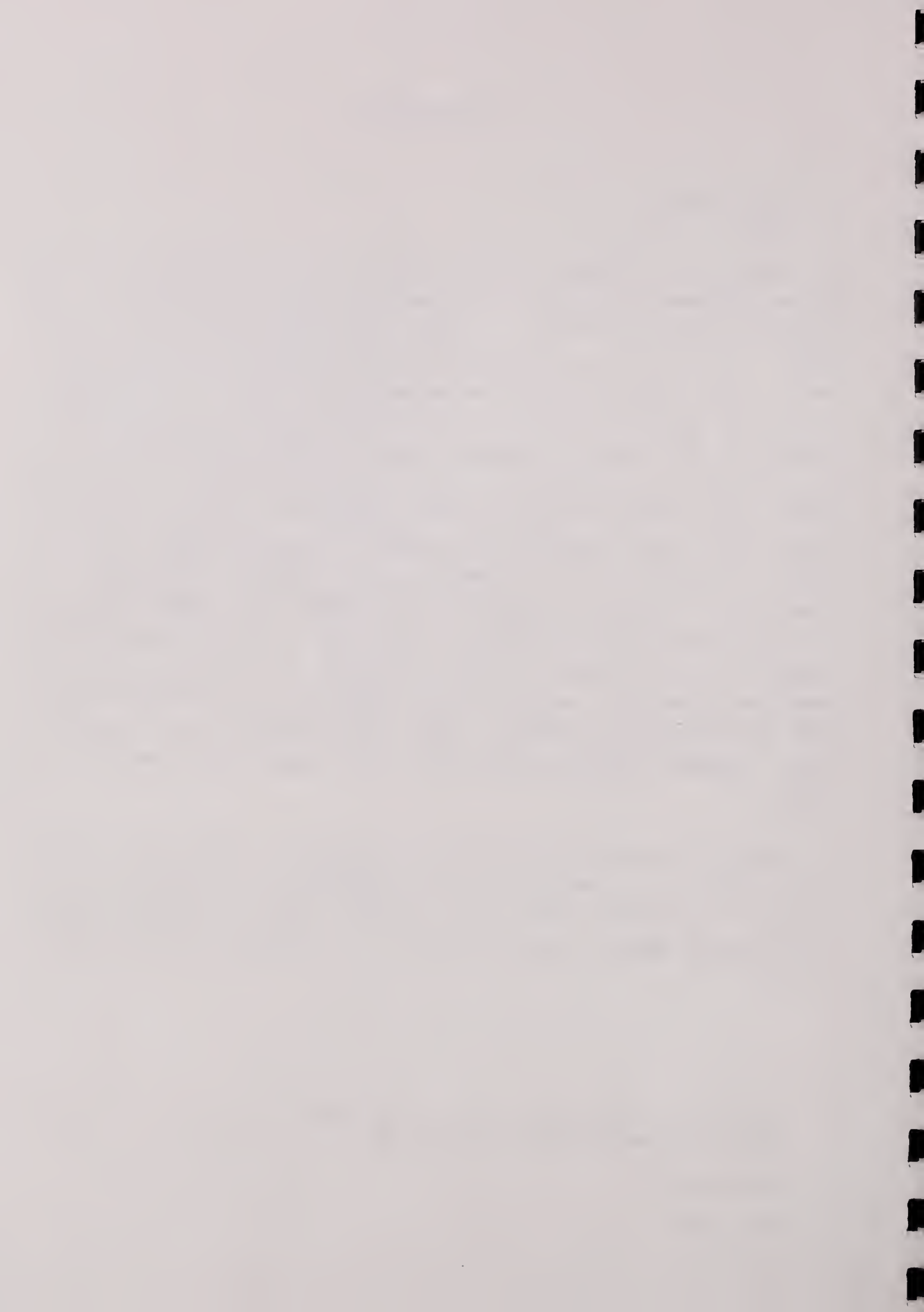
With a change in leadership, the Endowment responded to the New Federalism by placing increased emphasis on improved management procedures and accountability. Policy changes were implemented to reflect this new emphasis; for example, the submission of Final Descriptive and Statistical Reports are now a formal prerequisite for consideration for award of subsequent grants. In 1982, the Research Division issued Program Solicitation 82-1, Technical Assistance for a Pilot Program of Evaluation Studies, which acknowledged the Endowment's intention "to resume, by means of this pilot effort, the support of program evaluation studies... It is expected that these studies will provide the necessary experience to develop program evaluation studies into a continuing activity."

Three Endowment offices volunteered to participate in the pilot study and identified target subject areas:

> o Office of the Deputy Chairman for Management: Analysis and Use of Final Descriptive Reports from Grantees

> o Literature Program: Literary Magazines and Small Presses Category

> o Design Arts Program: Design Demonstration Category

Evaluation Technologies Incorporated (ETI) was awarded a contract to provide evaluation technical assistance in March 1983.

B. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The primary purposes of this report are to chronicle the evaluation design and implementation activities performed by ETI over the course of two contracts and the periods March 1983 - August 1984 and June 1985 - May 1986; to describe the evaluation processes applied; and to summarize the effects of the effort and to offer ETI's insights on the potential for evaluation applications at the Endowment.
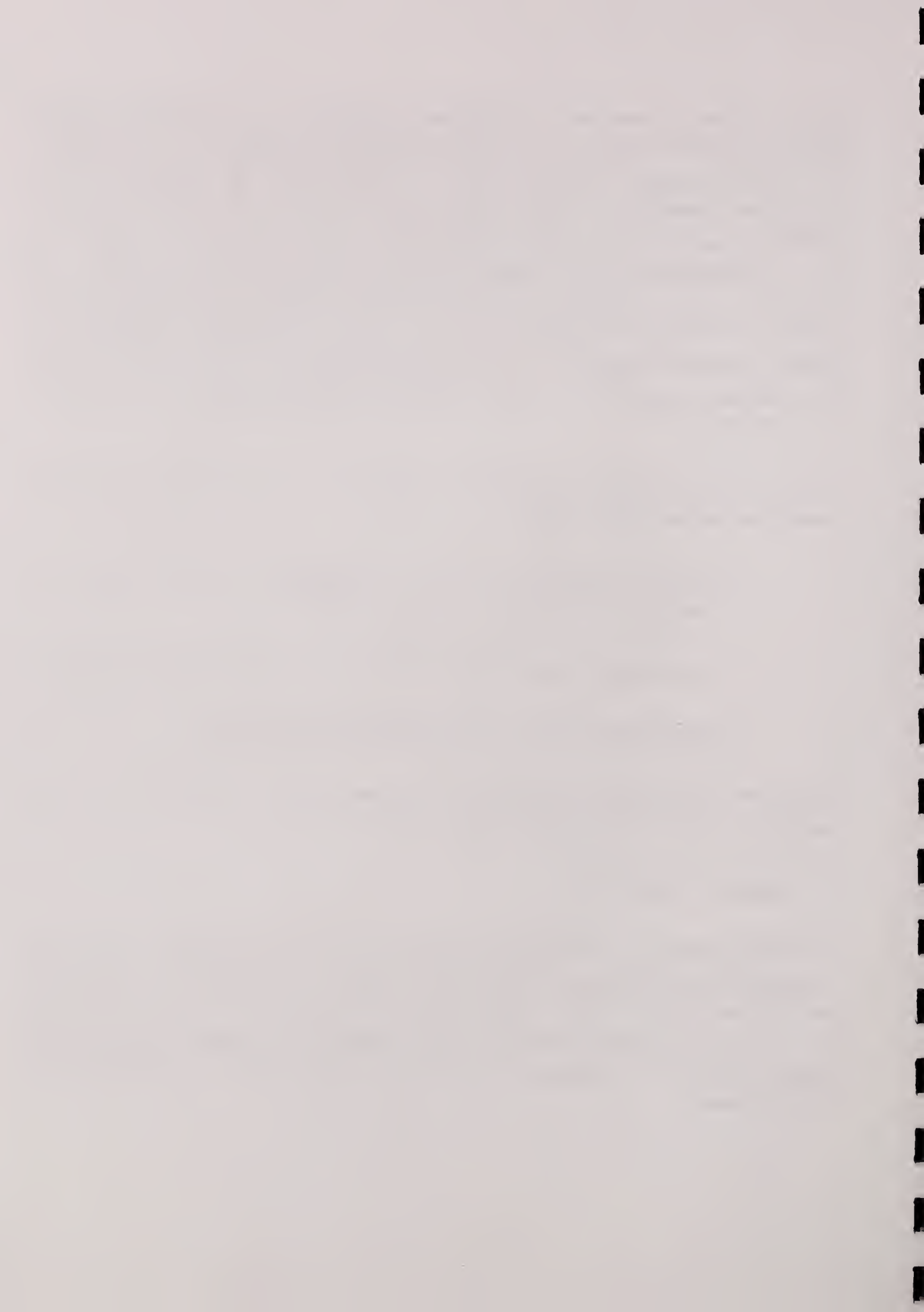
II. CONTRACT REQUIREMENTS

A. ENDOWMENT GOALS

The implicit goals of the contracted assignment were to test the application of evaluation, e.g.,

> o Is evaluation feasible for the Endowment given the highly subjective and non-quantifiable nature of art?

> o Can program activities be defined within an evaluation framework without infringing upon or threatening subjective and expert panel judgements?

> o Can evaluation activities be performed by Endowment staff within the context of their current grant-cycle responsibilities?

> o Can evaluation results be a useful tool for managers and panels?

The intent of this report is to support a resounding yes to each of these questions.

B. CONTRACT OBJECTIVES

The initial contract effort was directed toward defining and planning evaluation studies, to, through conferences with program staff, assess specific needs and offer appropriate methods for the formulation of approaches tailored to meet those needs. ETI was tasked with the following:

> o Set appropriate quantifiable goals

> o Find methods to economically collect data to measure achievements toward reaching those goals
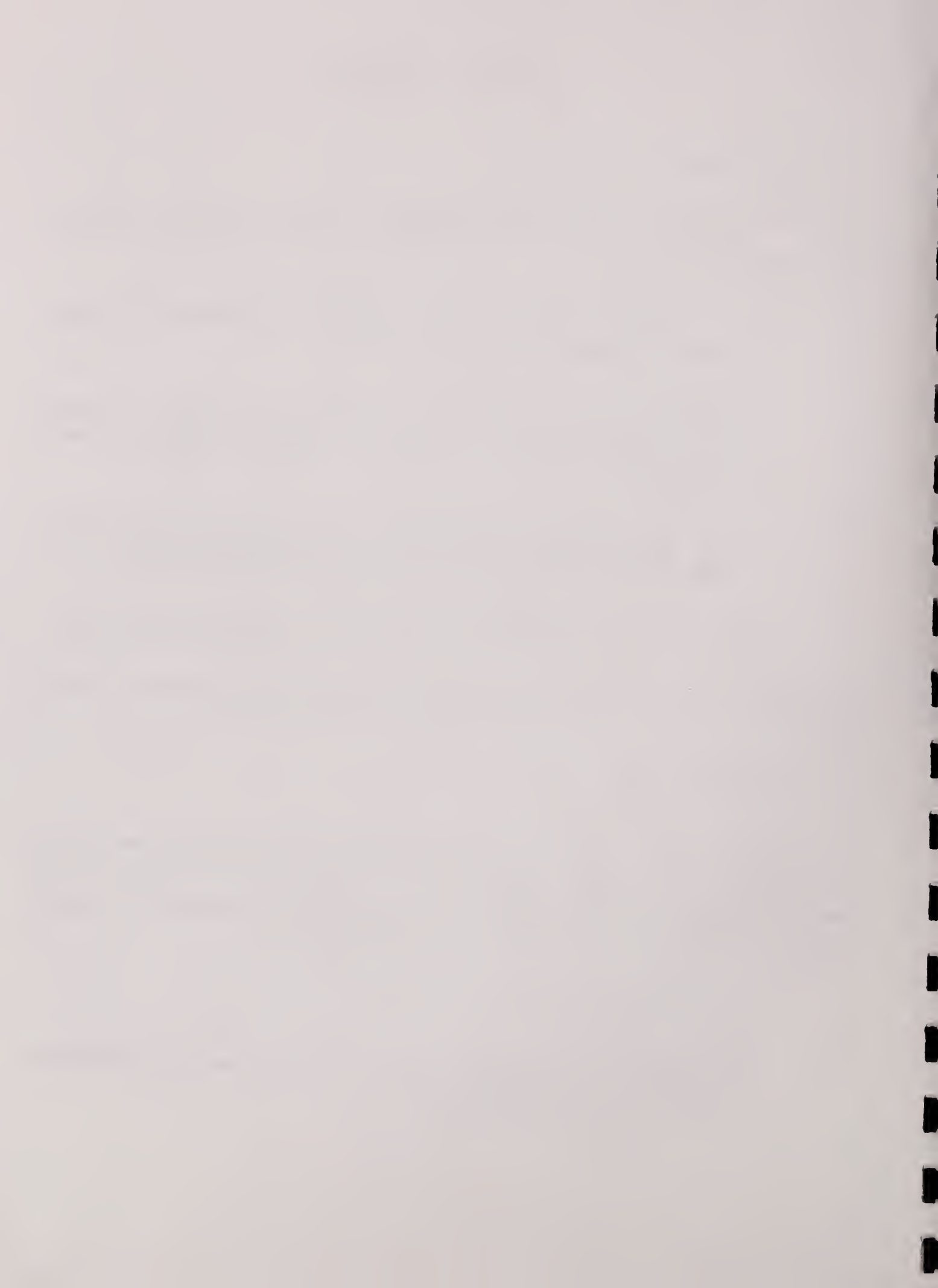
o Develop procedures for analyzing data and integrating the results into the decision-making process

o Present project results for agency implementation.

ETI understood that, in addition to developing program evaluation study designs, we were to work closely with program staff members throughout the process so as to facilitate an internal staff evaluation design capability. That is, to show Endowment staff how to design evaluation studies through demonstration and encouraging their participation throughout the process. Furthermore, ETI was to design the studies and provide guidance on their implementation so as to allow the research and analysis to be performed by in-house staff.

Following a one-year period of no internal action on the evaluation plans prepared by ETI, ETI was again contracted to implement the evaluation studies for each program, with their assistance in the collection of grantee data. ETI was requested to collect, process, and analyze evaluation data, and provide written reports on findings. ETI, in the process, also established automated data bases for the programs and made recommendations to the programs regarding revised program and grantee data collection schemes which would enhance future evaluation efforts. The automated systems were prepared so as to allow continued, expanded use by program staff. ETI, in essence, had developed historical data bases which allowed for easy updates as grant awards are made each year, and thus created the internal ability to have on-going program evaluation.

C. PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Initially, three Endowment offices volunteered to participate in the project:

o Office of the Deputy Chairman for Management
o Literature Program
o Design Arts Program.

Later in the contract period, a fourth office was included. The Inter-Arts Program was substituted when the Deputy Chairman for Management left the agency.

III. EVALUATION DESIGN

A. GOAL-BASED EVALUATION DESIGN PROCESS

The procedure ETI followed in defining evaluation objectives and developing the evaluation plans for each office was fairly standard, and is summarized below:

- o Review of program literature regarding current activities, previous studies, program documentation, and grant application guidelines

- o Repeated conferences with program staff to discuss program/category activities and possible evaluation issues for study, to define evaluation objectives, and to identify existing and potential data sources

- o Preparation of draft and final goal statement matrices; staff reviews and input

- o Preparation of evaluation strategy papers; staff reviews and input

- o Development and staff reviews of draft and final evaluation plans

- o Submission of detailed work plans, instructing program personnel on the implementation of the evaluation plans.

ETI began its work with each program by conducting a series of conferences with Endowment staff in each assigned office. Our first task was to discuss the differences between evaluation and research. We then, together, explored various evaluation issues of importance to the planning and development of the office, including how the evaluation findings would be used and by whom.

With a clear definition of an evaluation question, ETI then prepared a goals matrix. The purpose of the matrix was to visually portray the relationships

between Endowment, program, and category goals and to further illustrate how the program category activities can be defined for evaluation purposes. The matrices contained the following:

- o Endowment goals
- o Program goals
- o Category goals
- o Goal appraisal factors
- o Indicators/measures (pre-grant and post-grant)
- o Data sources
- o Data analysis plans
- o Hypotheses and assumptions

Upon program staff approval of the matrix, ETI prepared an evaluation strategy paper which further defined the proposed evaluation framework by discussing:

- o Evaluation focus, the category goals and evaluation objectives to be addressed

- o Uses of evaluation information, identification of the audiences and uses of evaluation outcomes

- o Plans for the evaluation design, description of the goal-based approach.

The evaluation strategy paper outlined the type of evaluation (i.e., formative or summative) to be designed, the types of information to be generated (e.g., project achievement at the individual grantee level), the measurement points (e.g., comparison of pre- and post-grant indicators for each project), and the anticipated uses of the evaluation findings (e.g., as input for short-range program management decisions and panel/funding/policy decisions; program advocacy).

Upon staff review and concurrence with the proposed evaluation strategy, ETI proceeded to prepare the evaluation plan. The evaluation plans included the following basic information:

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o Background information on the identification and definition of the evaluation objectives

o An overview of the evaluation framework and methodology

o Detailed data collection and analysis plans for each objective

o An outline for preparation of a final evaluation report.

ETI also prepared separate work plans as an accompaniment to the evaluation plan. The work plan described the nature, scope, and sequence of tasks involved in the implementation of the evaluation plan, including step-by-step procedures and potential pitfalls.

B. DESIGN PROCESS OUTCOMES

ETI's work with each of the participating offices was thoroughly documented, with each office receiving no less than six complete documents as described above. In addition to the production of those materials, and the individualized technical assistance provided throughout their development, certain other benefits were realized. ETI concluded its work with the following insights:

o It was demonstrated to each of the participating offices that program activity which is often considered "artistic and non-quantifiable" can, in fact, be defined within an evaluation framework without infringing upon or threatening subjective and expert panel judgements.

o Participating programs found the evaluation design process particularly useful in defining program information needs and purposes, and in identifying information sources and gaps.

o Participating programs suggested that evaluation data will benefit their programs in a number of ways, including:

-- Program management: monitoring program activities, developing funding priorities, providing guidance to applicants and grantees

-- Assistance to panels: providing information on the state-of-the-field, information on indicators of success, assistance in determining funding priorities and performance standards, assistance in reviews of program goals, policies, etc.

-- Advocacy: identification of trends in the field and of outstanding projects, and general information on how the category is doing overall.

o Program and category goals are frequently not expressed in measurable terms, may not be applied during the application review process, and may not be related to funding priorities. Related performance expectations or standards have not been consistently established.

For example, ETI found that, frequently, Endowment program goal statements incorporate words such as "innovative" and "of highest quality." For evaluation purposes, terms such as these must either be reworded or defined by quantitative performance indicators to allow meaningful measurement of goal achievement. As a case in point, the Services to the Arts Category of the Inter-Arts Program expressed one objective in terms of providing innovative business practices to artists and arts organizations. "Innovative" was defined, for evaluation planning purposes, in terms of the accessibility of the service to the arts community, its reduced cost to arts users, and/or its primary focus on the unique characteristics and needs of the arts users.

o Currently, there is little Endowment-provided incentive for programs to evaluate goal achievement.

That is, there currently exists no Endowment-wide policy regarding program evaluation. Existing evaluation efforts reflect individual program and even personal desires, efforts, and needs for evaluative feedback and information. And, in fact, no formal incentive exists to examine programs' histories of achievements when planning for future thrusts and activities, as for example in preparing the Congressionally-requested five-year plan.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION OF EVALUATION STUDIES

A. THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The procedure used to implement the evaluation design was relatively straight-forward. It entailed the development of data recording sheets; data collection, including reviews of the grant files, meetings with Endowment personnel, and telephone follow-ups for missing information; data analysis; and finally, report preparation.

The development of the data recording sheets was based on the goals statement matrix which had been generated during the evaluation design process. The data recording sheets were developed in a spreadsheet format to facilitate data entry and subsequent computer analysis, and included both pre-grant and post-grant information.

Data collection was a lengthy process. Endowment programs maintain extensive files on their grantees, which presuppose a well-developed vocabulary of terms and usages particular to the disciplines and the specific Endowment programs. Much of the information contained in the files was supplementary to the purposes of the evaluation. There was a pronounced learning curve with each of the program's files, to comprehend the arrangement and composition of the files, the language usage, as well as the location (or probable location) of information to be compiled on the data recording sheets.

The grant files for one program represented unique events and were grouped by chronological year. The files for another program could also have been grouped chronologically, but, because most of these grantees represented organizations which had been funded for several years successively, were instead arranged by those funded organizations. This latter arrangement permitted a somewhat more historical approach to be taken.

As the files were reviewed, it became apparent that the comparison built into the evaluation design (i.e., that of pre-grant and post-grant) could not be made with the information contained in the grant files. Either the dissimi-

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larities between the Endowment's pre-grant and post-grant information require-
ments were too great, or else the evaluation design posed specific questions/
concerns which had not previously been addressed by the programs evaluated.

To offset these gaps in information found following the review of the files,
telephone interviews with grantees were undertaken to collect missing infor-
mation. It was decided that the likelihood of response would be greater if
these were either conducted, or at least initiated, by Endowment personnel,
rather than the contractor.

Many of the grantees contacted used this opportunity to voice concerns about
Endowment procedures, such as the time lag between applying for the grant and
being awarded one. This adds to the intangibility of planning for arts ser-
vice organizations, as funding situations may change drastically over the
intervening period.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the entire implementation process for the
data collection phase was the scope and magnitude of the files, and the corre-
sponding magnitude of the learning curve.

The data collection efforts were significantly enhanced by the extensive input
and assistance from the Endowment personnel assigned to the evaluation and
also from their colleagues. For example, for the Design Arts evaluation,
information collection took place primarily at the Endowment: space was pro-
vided for the evaluator, as were various support services. A program profes-
sional was directly assigned to the evaluation effort and undertook all of the
telephone interviews with the grantees in order to collect missing informa-
tion. Close coordination with regards to the types of data needed forestalled
much confusion as to the specifics requested. In addition, this individual
was dedicated to the evaluation effort, having been hired in support of this
project. This luxury facilitated a close collaboration, whereby questions on
the references used in data collection could be clarified by the contractor,
and questions on outcomes and procedures used in competitions could be readily
explained by that individual.

The analysis plans were refined during the course of the implementation. Not only were significant numbers of responses missing, but program priorities (with regards to the some of the proposed analyses) also shifted. Realignments were therefore necessary and consisted, for the most part, of excising most of the comparative studies between pre-grant and post-grant, and of shifting the focus of the study to a more contextual and processual one, rather than conclusory.

B. IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS OUTCOMES

There were three principal outcomes for the implementation phase. The first concerns the statistical utility of the analyses, the second concerns automation of the data, and, the third, the focus of the evaluation reports themselves.

Statistical utility depends, for these reports, very much on where one sits. In terms of strict research, none of the analyses performed are truly analytical, past the basic descriptive mode. The statistics used were of an exceptionally basic nature, and because of missing data and shifted priorities, most of the second level analyses planned in the evaluation design could not be carried out. In terms of application, however, the basic descriptive statistics used present, for probably the first time, overviews of some of the grant programs, broken out by component parts. To put it into artistic terms, what these reports provide is the preliminary sketch for a painting: the composition and intent are evident, but the fullness and richness of the entire painting is not yet visible. Given different questions, and/or different time parameters with regards to collecting missing data, it is possible that such a painting might in time be developed. But for the immediate purposes of the Endowment, it is more useful to have the sketch, as it is at that phase of development that changes can be made most easily.

There are two additional statistical constraints: the size of the populations analyzed, and the audience for the evaluation report. Most of the data files created for evaluation purposes were of a size sufficient for most statistical analyses. Most of these data files were, however, subsequently divided into smaller units, which rendered much statistical analysis inappropriate due to

constraints of size. In addition, the people at the Endowment who read the reports are not analysts. They are not statisticians. They are, for the most part, individuals with particular talents in the field of the arts or of arts service. Numbers and statistical analyses have much less meaning for them than narrative descriptions, and qualitative analyses are preferred almost to the exclusion of quantitative ones.

A second particular outcome stems from the mechanics of automation. None of the information was on computers of any sort. Records are kept, and kept well, in vertical files. This evaluation effort represented one of the first attempts to format and analyze the data. It is clear that some type of data base management package would be of particular utility to the individual programs in terms of tracking the flow of information, of monitoring project performance and of maintaining an institutional memory that is not dependent on any one individual. It creates a factor of accessibility and immediacy not present with vertical files alone, and creates the ability to retrieve critical information and issues by and for Endowment staff, for the benefit of students of the arts, and for accountability to other government entities.

The third and final outcome concerned the focus of the reports generated for the Endowment. For example, for Design Arts personnel, the evaluation report has enhanced their ability to respond to information requests by clarifying the nature and scope of tasks required to operate and manage a design competition. The presentation of a holistic overview of the program for the last several years has also greatly facilitated ongoing training workshops in competition design and management. Feedback from Design Arts personnel concerning the usefulness of the report includes its application as a cross-reference tool for a recent publication on design competitions. The evaluation is credited with causing the program staff to establish more complete files for those competitions already held, and to establish particular criteria for monitoring ongoing and/or future ones. In addition, summaries of the report will be provided in the panelists' packages for this year's examination of grant applications. Design Arts personnel have not only their own, inside, perspective of the relative processes underlying a successful or unsuccessful competition, but now also have an outside, relatively unbiased, point of view of the organization and controls which create that process. As part of the

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project monitoring function, the report has provided the staff with more insight on what types of questions need to be asked at the various phases of the competition, and what particular efforts could best be encouraged.

A parallel concern also emerged with the focus of the reports, and refers back to the overall statistical utility of these documents. As most of the Endowment personnel have little or no familiarity with statistics, the writing of reports which are so strongly based in statistics must be altered radically to minimize the use of jargon, to present the findings in standard English, and to relate the analytical findings as closely as possible with the actual cases examined in the grant files. It is not so much literary style, but rather that the presentation of the data must be as informal as possible, with the maximum use of description of what the various results mean, and far less emphasis on the results themselves. In essence, the higher levels of analysis of the data are generated in the writing of these reports: synthesizing the data into a useful format for the non-statistical reader forces the development of hypotheses and trends in a coherent picture.

V. SUMMARY

<u>Is evaluation feasible for the Endowment given the highly subjective and non-quantifiable nature of art?</u>

Over a decade ago, the Endowment itself recognized the value of self-evaluation as a management and planning tool. It was also recognized that evaluation was routinely, yet informally, applied throughout the granting process. Through the two referenced contracts with Evaluation Technologies Incorporated (ETI), Endowment programs participating in this pilot effort were shown how to formalize that effort for greater utility.

Discussions with Endowment staff early in the evaluation design phase highlighted the fact that programs have identified many questions about the effects of their work, their impact on the field, their constituents, and other more specific issues of importance to program planning, development, and management. How are we doing? What have we learned? Are we being responsive to or influencing changes in the arts field? Evaluation research can contribute to internal learning and fostering the Endowment's valuable public relationships.

This pilot evaluation effort has demonstrated that by altering and refining the information management systems employed by each program, through, for example, the use of more targeted information collection instruments and automation of the data files, these types of questions can readily be answered. The evaluation effort identified the existing and potential sources of information, and demonstrated their usefulness in evaluation and information research.

<u>Can program activities be defined within an evaluation framework without infringing upon or threatening subjective and expert panel judgements?</u>

The types of evaluation studies requested by the programs we worked with did not put the Endowment in the position of judging the quality of the artistic endeavors pursued by grantees, but rather measured quality in terms of the

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arts community's response to the grant project. The evaluation designs also examined the grantees' abilities to effectively manage the project and the grant funds. As mentioned earlier, Endowment goals regarding such issues as "innovativeness" and work of "highest quality" were easily interpreted within the context of program category activities.

In fact, program staff members found the task of clearly defining and matching program/category goals and the information required to assess goal achievement a very useful exercise. We suggest that all programs undertake this type of activity whether or not a full evaluation is to be performed. It enhances the program's understanding of what information needs to be collected from applicants and grantees, and for what purpose(s). Grant application forms, supplemental information sheets, site visit records, and interim and final descriptive and financial report requirements can then be revised with the knowledge that only necessary information is being collected, while ensuring that critical information is not left uncaptured. These activities will serve to reduce the reporting burden of grantees and the information management activities of program staff. We further recommend that the same forms be used before and after the grant project is conducted to allow direct comparisons of planned and actual activities and expenses.

Can evaluation activities be performed by Endowment staff within the context of their current grant-cycle responsibilities?

The initial evaluation design and implementation tasks performed by ETI were unusually time consuming due to a number of anticipated factors which relate to the start-up of any new project, including the initial participant learning curve and the establishment of working relationships. More specifically, in this case, efforts to reconcile years-old grant records and frequent changes in grantee reporting requirements with the information requirements of the evaluation design also created some delays in the evaluation implementation phase.

Program personnel generally possess backgrounds and expertise in the arts, not in management sciences or research methodologies. However, ETI consistently found Endowment staff members receptive to and interested in expanding their

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capabilities in these disciplines, although at times appeared somewhat intimidated by their new skills. It is clearly evident that all Endowment staff could, with minimal coaching, perform evaluation design and implementation functions at the same level at which ETI has performed.

Furthermore, once the historical data bases have been compiled, as they now have in Design Arts and Inter-Arts, the task of maintaining them can become routine, and will even decrease the amount of time it currently takes for program specialists to file, maintain, and retrieve specific records. Their ability to respond to panelist and grant applicant inquiries will also be greatly facilitated.

What is missing is the incentive for programs to change their approach to information management -- the personal interest among program specialists is there and the capability to automate grant records exists, but there is no mandate or management initiative to do so. It is therefore recommended that an in-house evaluation technical assistance capability be established, or, at the very least, a how-to manual be prepared for Endowment-wide distribution. Additionally, training on evaluation methods should be offered for program personnel.

Can evaluation results be a useful tool for managers and panelists?

As program budgets are curtailed, the importance of truly evaluating program performance is heightened. Emphasis should be placed on identifying areas where cuts can be made while maintaining optimum program effectiveness.

In a more narrow focus, evaluation outcomes can be used for program-specific purposes, including:

> o Definition of information requirements
>
> o Identification of grantee-specific accomplishments and problems for consideration by panels tasked with making funding recommendations

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o Program planning, policy making, and advocacy

o Preparation of a lessons learned compendium

o Preparation of best practices handbooks and seminars for grantees
and other constitutents.

As outlined in Chapters III and IV, it is recommended that the Endowment expand its use of evaluation techniques, and, perhaps more importantly, consider the implementation of more targeted and less time consuming information collection and management systems within each program office.